

Weekly Reflection
Pentecost 13B, 2021

Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18

Ephesians 6: 10-20

John 6: 56-69

What does it mean to choose God?

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[As the years went by of my Christian life], I got tired of this relentless choosing. Tired of stumbling down the aisle Sunday after Sunday, consumed by guilt. Tired of wondering if my confessions were earnest enough to earn God's favor. Tired of not knowing for sure if I was saved, once and for all. Tired — most of all — of feeling like so much depended on *me*.

In recent years, I've moved away from that cathartic but anxiety-ridden version of choosing. When I walk into a worship service these days, I imagine myself entering into a Story much bigger, older, and wiser than the fickle ups and downs of my emotional life. I sink into the richness of tradition, sacrament, and liturgy, confident that the ancient rhythms of the Church will feed me. I lean away from the personal and into the communal, trusting that I'm just one small part of a vast and interconnected Body.

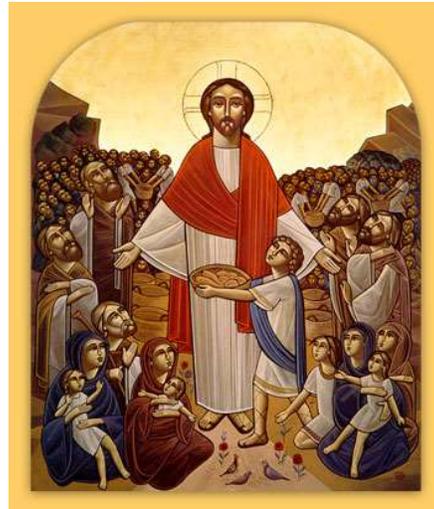
For the most part, these are good things. These changes in perspective have deepened my faith. I'm no longer worn out and worried all the time. I feel rooted. I feel held.

And yet. And yet as both the Old Testament and New Testament lectionary readings this week make clear, choice still matters. "Choose this day whom you will serve," Joshua tells the Israelites as they present themselves before God at Shechem. Choose this day. Here. Now. "Do you also want to go away?" Jesus asks his disciples as people take offense at his teachings and abandon him. Now the stakes have gone up. Jesus has said the shocking thing. The seemingly impossible thing. *"Those who eat my flesh and*

drink my blood abide in me and I in them." *"Whoever eats me will live because of me."* This is the fork in the road. It's time to choose.

In other words, these are passages about *real* choices. Real choices with real consequences.

Interestingly, what's at stake in these decisions is not the identity or eternal security of the choosers. In the reading from Joshua, the Israelites are already chosen and beloved of God. They have a long history with Yahweh — a history of deliverance from slavery,



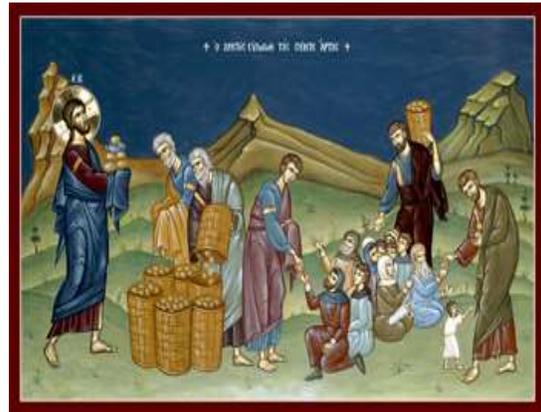
manna in the desert, and steady direction in the wilderness. Likewise, the people who abandon Jesus are not starry-eyed newbies; John's Gospel makes clear that they are already Christ's "disciples." He has fed them, taught them, healed them, and loved them.

No, what's at stake in both stories is whether or not God's already-beloved-and-rescued children will choose — hourly, daily, moment by moment — to live fully into who they already are. The daily "altar call" is a call to hold in tension two amazing and paradoxical truths: one, that God has already chosen us. And two, that we are *therefore* invited to choose (or not choose) God in return, not once or twice, but over and over and over again. To trade one version of choice for the other is to diminish and distort the Gospel.

So I'm back to my original question: what does it mean to choose God? Not as a one-time walk down the aisle, not as a communal catharsis in an ornate sanctuary, but as an intimate gift meant for both our individual *and* our collective lives? A costly practice? A daily, hard-won discipline?

It's worth noting that neither Joshua nor Jesus take pains in these lectionary readings to make choosing God easy. If anything, they make it *harder*. Joshua explains in no uncertain terms the fidelity, obedience, and tenacity a covenant relationship with God requires. "If you'd rather worship the idols of your ancestors, go for it," he tells his listeners. "Because the life Yahweh calls you to is no joke. He means business."

Likewise, Jesus doesn't argue back or make excuses when his followers take offense and deem his teachings "too hard." He never offers them "Christ Lite" or "Jesus for Dummies" instead. No, he lets them wander off with their questions unanswered and their doubts unresolved. Why? Because he's not so much user-friendly as he is unflinchingly honest. Yes, this teaching is hard. It's also glorious, it's also life-giving, it's also blessed, but it's *hard*.



What does it mean to choose

God? According to Jesus, it means "eating" his very essence, taking the Incarnation so deeply into our own bodies and souls that we exude the flavor of Christ to the world. It means doing what Jesus did and living as Jesus lived. It means turning the other cheek. It means loving our enemies. It means walking the extra mile. It means losing our lives in order to gain them. It means trusting that the first will be last and the last first. It means seeking God's kingdom and God's righteousness. It means denying ourselves. It means the cross.

Honestly, it's stunning that Jesus had any followers left. Maybe the real miracle of the bread and fish story is not that Jesus fed five thousand people with a tiny bagged lunch, but that even a handful of those people stuck around when he was finished teaching.

"Do you also want to go away?" There's something so vulnerable and poignant in the question. I imagine Jesus asks it sadly, but with his characteristic compassion and understanding. He knows full well what he's asking of his followers, and he wants them

to know that his love is a freeing love. They're free to walk away. The question makes me uncomfortable, because the answer is yes. Yes, I *do* want to go away sometimes. I want to quit. I want to be comfortable. I want to pick an easier, less demanding, less costly version of the Gospel. But here's the deal: that version doesn't exist. It just plain doesn't. As Peter rightly responds to Jesus, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life."

I'm comforted by the fact that even bold, brash Peter doesn't shout a Spirit-filled "No!" to Jesus's question. He doesn't "yes" or "no." He just responds with a question of his own. Not an enthusiastic, flattering question. A searching one. "Lord, what are the alternatives? Your teachings are hard, but they have life in them. If you truly are who you say you are, why would we choose death when life is right here, in your words, in your body, in the strange food you're asking us to eat? You are Life itself. To whom else would we go?"

What does it mean to choose God? What has it meant to you in the past, and what does it mean now? It's a question we must keep asking ourselves, because the choice never goes away. Choose *this* day. And *this* day. And the day after that. Keep choosing, because God has chosen. He always and already chooses us. Now it's our turn